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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to make students aware of the issue of self, society, and authority in their writing, and to discover which aspects of the writing workshop method are productive and which are not relative to student perceptions of their authority as writers. A university-required junior level composition course was designed in which students wrote two five-page papers, several shorter response papers, and read fiction and non-fiction. The final examination for the course was a three-part essay question which asked students to (1) describe aspects of the workshop which made them feel like "displaced persons"; (2) discuss aspects of the workshop which made them feel connected to a community; and (3) explain how they felt about being placed in or displaced from the workshop. All students seemed to share the same problem--the presence of a multiplicity of voices competing in their writing. Because students had collaborative alternatives to the workshop, they were very positive about three aspects of it: they felt empowered as readers and responders to the texts of their peers; they felt connected to the workshop when their responses centered on the last stages of revision; and, they felt good about sharing their work in the workshops. The writing workshop seems to make the most sense in the reentry phase, a place for students to publish, share, and polish their work, but not to create or shape writing and not to negotiate authority. (MG)

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Teaching Composition and the Creative Writing Workshop

by

Wendell Mayo, Jr.

According to the February, 1990 Associated Writing Programs Chronicle, since 1975 the number of institutions offering creative writing concentrations has increased ten-fold for BA's, four-fold for MA's, and six-fold for Ph.D's (22). Many of these programs employ the "workshop" method: ten to fifteen students sitting in a circle in the presence of a "master craftsperson," critiquing student texts one by one. I am a product of an MFA graduate writing program. I am now pursuing a Ph.D. and often called on to teach undergraduate composition. I am concerned about the effectiveness of the creative writing workshop method in the composition classroom. Harvey Kail and John Trimbur suggest that students have a need to "unlearn" traditional, hierarchical concepts of knowledge and to negotiate authority with peers. How effective is the workshop method in engendering or impeding this renegotiation of authority?

To explore this question, I collaborated with an assistant professor, Mara Holt, in the design of a university-required junior level composition course. Students wrote two five-page papers, several shorter response papers, and read fiction and non-fiction. Class sections were combined for lectures, special presentations, and videos. Mara Holt brought collaborative learning to the design of the course and

an understanding of writing as socially-constructed. I contributed experience in the creative writing workshop method and a strong interest in personal voice. The readings were selected for their assumptions about self and society, thus allowing instructors and students to explore this tension in student writing. Throughout the course, students were asked to read and to respond to texts which dealt with the displacement of the individual from society. Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Displaced Person," Gordon Allport's study, "Formation of In-Groups," Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, Rose Weitz's "What Price Independence? Social Reactions to Lesbians, Spinsters, Widows and Nuns" are examples.

Classroom pedagogy was based partly on collaboration and partly on a modification of the creative writing workshop method which, unlike collaborative learning, assumes that writing is initially private, and that revision is accomplished by direct discussion of the text in the classroom, where students are in joint apprenticeship to one instructor.

The overall purpose of the study was to make students aware of the issue of self, society, and authority in their writing, and to discover which aspects of the writing workshop are productive and which are not relative to student perceptions of their authority as writers.

The final examination for the course was a three-part essay question, which asked students to 1) describe aspects of the workshop during which they felt like displaced persons (to borrow the term in Flannery O'Connor's short story), 2) to describe aspects of the workshop during which they felt connected to a community, and 3) to conclude by explaining how they felt about being "placed in" or "displaced from" the

workshop. Students were asked: In which situations did you feel confident and authoritative about your writing or the converse?

Student examinations revealed three general reactions to the workshop. One group of students struggled with the consensus implied by the workshop setting. One student wrote: "[I]n order to write effectively, you have to overcome . . . differences in opinion [in the workshop]." Another student felt that other writers "put their knowledge into my paper." One student seemed to articulate the problem best: "A lot of my feeling of displacement stems from my inability to believe in what I have written. . . . The moments I noticed my feeling of displacement . . . most [were those when I anticipated] the reaction of my peers [to] my paper."

Troubled by the implied consensus, a second group of students actively sought alternative sources for feedback on their writing. Even when their work was generally praised by members of the workshop, some students sought second opinions from members of their smaller, collaborative groups or other persons. One student wrote, "It was when I was alone and had no [immediate] feedback coming in from [the workshop] that gave me problems. . . . I would, on occasion . . . call up [another student] to ask for feedback." But generally, these outside sources of feedback seemed disappointing to students. One student observed: "My mother read [my workshop draft] and told me it was too repetitious . . . and my father then explained to me what [a key aspect of my paper] <u>really</u> meant [sic]. I decided I was trying to take my parents' understanding, rather than maintaining my own."

A third group of students felt more powerful and in control when

they isolated themselves from the workshop—a version of civil disobedience. These students felt more comfortable when they resisted or transgressed the implicit consensus or norms. I feel that the need of these students to reject the workshop was a function of their increased awareness of self and society in the readings and exercises in class. This group expressed this emphatically in the final examination. A student declared, "Workshop was a time when I [as a writer] had to stand alone." Another student wrote, "[In the workshop] I [felt] displayed as a model of my beliefs. . . . We often view [displacement] as being bad, when in actuality we're displaced all the time. Not only as writers but as people. . . . We are displaced when writing because we all have different tales to tell."

It is encouraging that students, made aware of the issue of displacement, were not afraid to resist and to stand outside of the workshop. "Thanks, but no thanks," a student suggested in this context. In her examination essay, one student described her mother as a writer who successfully resists a community and at the same time is accepted by it. She wrote, "My [mother] is a poet (she's even been published) and a pretty radical feminist. She seems to want to be displaced. She thrives on being different and she gets attention [to her work] that way."

Students in all three groups seemed to share the same problem: the presence of a multiplicity of voices competing in their writing. One student suggested that "[The workshop] is good practice, but it gets confusing because [as writers] . . . we must decide who [is] right." Students seemed to struggle with three voices described by Michel

Foucault and discussed by Kurt Spellmeyer in the context of the self in discourse. One voice is that of the institution, where discourse is within established order. A second voice is that of "Inclination," one which "dreams of a language without prohibitions." The third voice is that of Foucault's persona, the "I" searching for a role in a game of truth (Spellmeyer 716).

The first group of students, concerned with the consensus in the workshop, described their struggle with the voice of a surrogate institution. The second group, seeking alternatives to the surrogate institution, yet not wanting to be altogether displaced from it, seemed to struggle with their roles as writers in a game of truth. The third group, preferring outright isolation, seemed to be hearing the voice of "Inclination," and refused all rules of the game.

Since I used collaborative work to make students aware of the issue of placement versus displacement, students' instinctive rejection of some aspects of the workshop also seems connected to what Kail and Trimbur call the need to "unlearn," to dissociate from "official structures," and "to demystify the authority of knowledge and its institutions" (10-11). Although students struggled with the issue of self in their writing, the fact that students were made aware of the issue seemed to help them manage the situation. Although Spellmeyer suggests that the voices of "Institution" and "Inclination" are both "reassuring and deceptive" (716), students were generally conscious of the tension between these oppositions.

Because students had collaborative alternatives to the workshop, they were very positive about three aspects of it. First, they felt

empowered as readers and responders to the texts of their peers. A student suggested, "[T]he only time I [did] not feel displaced . . . [was] when I [was] reviewing someone else's work." Second, students felt connected to the workshop when their responses centered on the last stages of revision. A student observed, "[A]ll too often, we, as writers, get on a roll, and when we start, there's no stopping. This is when [mechanical] mistakes occur, and . . . when the workshop proves to be very beneficial." Last, students felt good about just sharing their work in the workshops. One student responded, "[It was] . . . a way to share myself with others."

Kail and Trimbur suggest that peer tutoring is an effective "form of social organization to negotiate the crisis [of authority] successfully and [to] reenter the official structures of authority" (emphasis added 11). The writing workshop, then, seems to make the most sense in the reentry phase, a place for students to publish, share, and polish their work, but not to create or shape it—and certainly not to negotiate authority. If limited in this way, the workshop can be a productive part of an overall collaborative strategy, but it should not be the only strategy.

Another benefit of this cross-pollination of collaborative learning and the creative writing workshop is the questions it raises in different theoretical areas. For example, can the writing workshop, if limited to the final stages of writing, be productive in an overall collaborative framework? Perhaps more importantly, should we redefine the traditional approach to teaching creative writing in terms of collaboration and post-structuralist concepts of the self?

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